

LIVING HISTORY – THE STORY OF ADDERLEY STREET’S FLOWER SELLERS

Lizette Rabe

Department of Journalism, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch 7602

Lewende geskiedenis – die verhaal van Adderleystraat se blommeverkopers

Kaapstad is waarskynlik sinoniem met Tafelberg. Maar een van die letterlik kleurrike tonele aan die voet van dié berg is waarskynlik eweneens sinoniem met die stad: Adderleystraat se “beroemde” blommeverkopers. Tog word hulle al minder, hoewel hulle deel van Kaapstad se lewende geskiedenis is en letterlik tot die Moederstad se kleurrike lewe bygedra het en ’n toerismebaken is. Waar kom hulle vandaan, en belangrik, wat is hulle toekoms? Dié beskrywende artikel binne die paradigma van mikrogeskiedenis is sover bekend ’n eerste sosiaal-wetenskaplike verkenning van die geskiedenis van dié unieke groep Kapenaars, die oorsprong van die blommemark en sy kleurrike blommenalatenskap.

Sleutelwoorde: Adderleystraat; blommemark; blommeverkopers; Kaapstad; kultuurgeskiedenis; snyblomme; toerisme; veldblomme.

Cape Town is probably synonymous with Table Mountain. But one of the colourful scenes at the foot of the mountain may also be described as synonymous with the city: Adderley Street’s “famous” flower market. Yet, although the flower sellers are part of Cape Town’s living history, a beacon for tourists, and literally contributes to the Mother City’s vibrant and colourful life, they represent a dying breed. Where do they come from, and more importantly, what is their future? This descriptive article within the paradigm of microhistory is, thus far known, a first social scientific exploration of the history of this unique group of Capetonians, the origins of the flower market, and its flower legacy.

Key words: Adderley Street; Cape Town; cultural history; cut flowers; flower market; flower sellers; microhistory; wild flowers; tourism.

Introduction

Adderley Street's colourful flower sellers can be described as synonymous with Cape Town. They simply "go" together, like the clouds enveloping the mountain, the "Cape Doctor" in the form of the seasonal South Easter, and, yes, the spicy smells of Cape Malay cooking. But where do they come from, and what are the challenges facing this "living history" on Cape Town's streets? And more important, will this "famous"¹ touristic beacon, based at Trafalgar Place on Adderley Street, still be sustainable and viable in a couple of years' time?

Trafalgar Place is located next to the Golden Acre shopping mall in the heart of Cape Town, linking Adderley Street with Parliament Street. The Stuttafords department store, which indirectly played a role in the establishment of the flower market, used to be across Trafalgar Place on the opposite side of Adderley Street.

Incidentally, in 2010 it will be 120 years² since the very first flower seller sold her first bouquet in Stuttafords. Since then her followers and their descendants have graced Adderley Street, to become, as a group, an iconic symbol of the Cape's culture and its sights, sounds and smells.

Yet, the current licence holders are facing an uphill struggle, and their numbers are dwindling. A bad economy, lifestyle changes, as well as changes in consumer habits and competition since supermarkets have also started selling flowers, as well as a local metropolitan government that has more pressing tasks than ensuring the legacy of this important living part of Cape history, are some of the factors impacting on a sustainable future.

This first exploratory and descriptive study will attempt to map the origins of Adderley Street's flower sellers, the families that have become synonymous with Trafalgar Place, some prominent Capetonians who were role-players in the establishment and sustainability of the flower market, the colourful assortment of flowers that were first on offer, as well as a first recognition of some individuals (among many), who today ensure that Adderley Street's literally fragrant heart remains intact (**Figure 1**).

Theoretical point of departure

History has traditionally occupied itself with recording the events that change the course of nations and regions. Within the discipline of history, the notion of cultural history has, generally, been regarded as of lesser importance as opposed to mainstream

¹ As described in many tourist brochures as well as on the Internet, e.g. http://www.southafrica-travel.net/westcape/capetown_adderley.htm, 2009-07-24.

² C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 198.



**Figure 1: Cape Town's world famous flower market on Trafalgar Place,
Adderley Street**
(Photograph: L. Rabe, 2009)

historiography. This author would however want to take the notion of cultural history beyond these limitations, and add another layer to it, namely that of microhistory.

The notion of microhistory, although not a well-known area in South African historiography, even among cultural historians, is a suitable instrument to investigate the lives and times of Cape Town's flower broker families.

A simplistic description of microhistory is that it is, of course, a branch of the study of history. Microhistory has been described as one of the *most interesting and innovative*³ approaches to history, especially cultural and social history.

It was first developed in the 1960s, and can be described as the *study of the past on a very small scale*.⁴ According to this source, it is typically the study of a small town or village. Other studies involve individuals of *minor importance*. It is said to be an important component of *new history*, as it has emerged from the 1960s, and is usually studied closely together with other social sciences, such as anthropology or sociology.⁵

Scholars still disagree on a definition of microhistory, especially in the United States. As Lepore writes:

*... [a]ny attempt to define microhistory is vastly complicated by the fact that few American works of scholarship ever label themselves microhistory ... Indeed ... a recent anthology of essays about 'personal identity' – and cited as a key example of microhistory in a call for papers for a recent conference on microhistory – prefers to call its essays 'histories of self' rather than microhistories. One explanation for this reticence is that microhistory was established among historians of early modern Europe.*⁶

She adds that the mentioned American conference on microhistory defined the paradigm *in part, as the history of 'hitherto obscure people' that 'concentrates on*

³ S.G. Magnusson, n.d. What Is Microhistory? <http://hnn.us/articles/23720.html>. 2007-04-07.

⁴ As per a definition from Wikipedia. Although the author realises that this online encyclopedia is generally regarded with suspicion, and not recommended for use in the social sciences, the author wants to challenge this as this encyclopedia can be, and is, corrected in-time, whereas existing encyclopedias are not, and certainly cannot be regarded as the alpha and omega on issues simply because it is in book form, especially not in a digital age. This author therefore deems the Wikipedia definition as succinct and useful as it describes microhistory in a nutshell, and can stand the test if verified against other sources such as Iggers, Ginzburg and Magnusson, who will not be dealt with here because of space constraints. This description is useful for the "micro" notion of microhistory, and can stand the test of verification against other sources. WIKIPEDIA. 2007-04-06.

⁵ As per a definition from Wikipedia. 2007-04-06.

⁶ J. Lepore, Historians who love too much: reflections on microhistory and biography, *The Journal of American History* 88(1), June 2001, p. 130.

*the intensive study of particular lives' to reveal 'the fundamental experiences and mentalités of ordinary people'.*⁷

Some well-known exponents of microhistory are Ginzburg, Hunt and Magnusson. The latter is also the chair of the Center for Microhistorical Research at the Reykjavik Academy in Iceland. Quoting the German-US historian Georg G. Iggers in his summary of the development of modern historical practice, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, Magnusson writes that microhistory came about

*... not because the microhistorians considered that the traditional methodology of the social sciences 'is not possible or desirable but that social scientists have made generalizations that do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life they claim to explain'.*⁸

Another source describes the origins of microhistory as follows:

*The movement of historians, particularly those educated in Europe, towards a microhistorical approach to studying history developed from a political and cultural debate occurring in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s. As historians began to focus on social rather than economic factors, it became clear that certain "political events and social realities" could not be explained adequately by existing macrohistorical models.*⁹

The source adds:

*Focusing on the individual rather than the group also has led microhistorians to focus on the 'margins' of power rather than the centre. For microhistorians, this has included examining the lives and experiences of the disadvantaged and exploited, individuals who are often neglected by macrohistorical studies and who rarely fit the existing or resulting model.*¹⁰

It is said that: *[b]y doing so, microhistorians have attempted to formulate a history of everyday life.*¹¹

⁷ J. Lepore. Historians who love too much, *The Journal of American History* 88 (1), June 2001, p. 131.

⁸ S.G. Magnusson, n.d. What is Microhistory? <http://hnn.us/articles/23720.html>. 2007-04-07.

⁹ What is microhistory? <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/vicbrewery/content/microhistory.htm>, 2010-03-30.

¹⁰ What is microhistory? <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/vicbrewery/content/microhistory.htm>, 2010-03-30.

¹¹ What is microhistory? <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/vicbrewery/content/microhistory.htm>, 2010-03-30.

Microhistory can thus be used as a typical means of recording the lives and times of the community forming the topic of this article: the individuals and families behind a Cape Town social institution, namely the flower sellers of Adderley Street.

One should also add that because historians are unavoidably influenced by personal background and social experiences, and because mainstream history was until recently the *fragile expressions of white male historians' limited perspectives*,¹² there is a need to rewrite history – or, also, as it has been phrased: to rewrite history and write “herstory”. This can also be applied to the Cape’s flower sellers, as it is mostly a matriarchal line that is pursued in the “handing over” of the flower selling legacy to the next generation.

Microhistory therefore is useful in recording the contribution in various fields by those who are, according to Sochen’s description, “other” than male or white in the accepted Western understanding of a hegemonic male world view.

Microhistory, in other words, can unlock the plethora of “herstories” or “other” stories that still need to be recorded. In this case, the flower brokers were not only the “other” in terms of race and the historiography of South Africa, but, as said, many of the flower brokers have a matriarch as its core driver, and therefore, in a hegemonic male society, attention to their history is also long overdue. Sochen writes:

*Historians of the Western world have traditionally written about, and thereby preserved in print, the spectacular events, actions, personalities, and thoughts of human history. [...] Their idea of spectacularity has been governed by their cultural views: most especially, their inherent assumption that man, rather than woman, is the maker of history and culture: and that the white man, rather than the black man, is the noteworthy participant in history. [...] [A]ll historians operate within their particular frames of reference, their unique regions, genetic makeup, family upbringing, and social experiences. Thus, the records of history are indeed fragile expressions of white male historians' limited perspectives.*¹³

Sochen writes that although these human limitations on historians cannot be overcome, it can be controlled.

The liberation movements of women and blacks during the 1960s and 1970s have made all Westerners more aware of the serious prejudices that have

¹² J. Sochen, *Movers and Shakers. American women thinkers and activists 1900-1970* (New York, Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973), p. ix.

¹³ J. Sochen, *Movers and Shakers. American women thinkers and activists 1900-1970* (1973), p. ix.

*governed society's treatment of these groups. Historians, among others, have been faced with the need to redress the legitimate grievances suffered by women and blacks in their written records. [...] The history books are slowly being rewritten to include these heretofore forgotten groups.*¹⁴

The Adderley Street flower sellers can also be regarded as one of the *heretofore forgotten groups*. Because of this, they have become a “threatened species” on the streets of Cape Town specifically, and in the cultural life of Cape Town in general, and urgent steps need to be taken to preserve their trade and their legacy. Especially in view of the 120th celebration of the first flower seller broking with her baskets of wild flowers in Adderley Street¹⁵ co-inciding with the a world event, namely the 2010 World Cup celebrations in Cape Town, urgent consideration needs to be given to their plight.

It also needs to be said that the consequences of specifically South Africa's Apartheid history, resulting in uprooting communities under the Group Areas Act, are also factors that have impacted on the flower sellers' families, and also needs to be recorded from the perspectives of the flower families. Although this article will only refer in passing to this seismic event in the lives of some of the flower families, it should also be stated that this aspect of the histories of these families needs to be recorded.

Methodology

This first exploratory article attempts to record the history of the world famous flower sellers of Adderley Street. Various instruments to collect data were used. Primary sources, mostly the current licensees, in some cases third or fourth generation descendants of the first families who sold flowers in Adderley Street, were interviewed, as well as other primary and secondary sources.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with various role-players and representatives of some of the families. The information gained from these sources, as well as research from certain primary and secondary sources, was used to construct this initial narrative of the history of the flower sellers.

Researcher found that although the flower sellers are photographed on many occasions by the media, the accompanying reports do not carry substantial information other than the names of the individuals on the photographs.

¹⁴ J. Sochen, *Movers and Shakers. American women thinkers and activists 1900-1970* (1973), p. ix.

¹⁵ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 198.

Indeed, one source on microhistory referred to the lack of substantive reference material:

*The primary challenge faced by microhistorians when developing these histories of everyday life is a lack of reference material. The marginalized subjects of their studies have left few traces or documents regarding their lives and experiences and those who have, may not be representative of the sector of the population under consideration.*¹⁶

Lepore also refers to the *vulnerabilities* of this genre of historiography, *including being dismissed as selective and unrepresentative.*¹⁷

One source that proved to be substantive, was that of Lighton, which was one of the few sources with historical information. As this is the first exploratory article on this important subject, it is hoped, however, that other sources will in future be uncovered to add to the existing history of the flower sellers of the Cape. The data to be found in the City of Cape Town's archives will hopefully also be accessed for further studies, although it was not considered necessary for this first exploratory article. Documents received from the current chairperson of the Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers' Association, Irefaam (Faan) Williams,¹⁸ oldest grandson of Julaiga Gomez, will also be used for further studies as not all the information could be dealt with within the limitations of one article.

A special thanks go to various sources who trusted me with their stories, among them, for this article, also Aunt Mary Petersen, a living encyclopedia of the history of Constantia valley and her people before they were relocated under the Apartheid Government's Group Areas Act.

This article will now proceed to give a broad outline of the history of the Adderley Street's flower sellers, who they are and where they "brokered" with their literally beautiful commodity, namely flowers. The first part relating to the history of the flower sellers relies mostly on Lighton as source.

The flower seller who started it all

Conrad Lighton, a Capetonian and historian who seemingly loved everything "Cape" with a passion, writes in his *Cape Floral Kingdom – the story of South Africa's wild*

¹⁶ What is microhistory? <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/vicbrewery/content/microhistory.htm>, 2010-03-30.

¹⁷ J. Lepore. Historians who love too much, *The Journal of American History* 88 (1), June 2001, pp. 130-131.

¹⁸ Interview: Mr Irefaam (Faan) Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, Retreat, 2009-09-25.

flowers, and the people who found, named and made them famous the world over that it was the Capetonians' love for their indigenous plants which

... brought wild flowers into the heart of their city; for it was the richness and abundance of the Cape flora that led to a Cape Town custom which remains one of the Peninsula's most picturesque assets – the Adderley Street flower market.¹⁹

According to Lighton *The Cape Argus* on 2 October 1886 reported: *It is a lamentable fact that there is absolutely no place in Cape Town where a bunch of wild flowers can be bought for money.* The newspaper reported that

... [j]ust now the flowers of spring are all around us. But unless you are a professional botanist or an unprofessional pedestrian, and have leisure and legs to scour plains and scale mountains, the bloom and beauty of our matchless wild flowers will escape you.

The newspaper then suggested that a *little enterprise* was needed. It refers to the then owner of a well-known city store, William Thorne,²⁰ and his partner, Samson R. Stuttaford, who might have been influenced by these words, as

... [n]ot long afterwards, Thorne certainly showed enterprise when he gave a Coloured woman a standing order to bring two bunches of wild flowers to the store every week. He enlisted his partner's 20-year-old son as a purchaser too, and soon several other people became interested as well.²¹

According to Lighton, this very first Cape Town flower seller then would collect her basket of flowers, and after supplying her regular customers in the shop, she would place her basket on the pavement in Adderley Street and sell the rest of her bunches to passers-by. In an interview with one of the matriarchs of the Cape flower selling

¹⁹ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 7.

²⁰ Sir William Thorne (1833-1917) became mayor of Cape Town in 1902. A family member, Helen Renira Holt, published a book in 1989, *Flower Sellers & Celia's Cape floral kingdom*, with reminiscences of her great-aunt, Celia Thorne, a daughter of Thorne, and her experiences with the Cape's flower sellers, especially Louisa Damon (spelt Doamun). The author is, despite help from the Stellenbosch University's J.S. Gericke Library, still attempting to locate a copy of this book.

²¹ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 7.

“dynasties”, Julia Gomez, it transpired that her grandmother might in all probability have been this very first flower seller.²²

And so Adderley Street was enriched by this very first colourful flower seller. Lighton writes that this pioneer flower seller was joined by others,

*... and by the time the sandstone General Post Office (since demolished) was completed in the 'nineties a long line of baskets, buckets and baths crammed with heaths, arum lilies, sugar-bushes and chinchinchees lined the kerbside opposite Stuttafords and overflowed into Trafalgar Place where the modern flower market is now.*²³

It can be speculated that the origin of the popular word which is still used by the flower sellers to this day to describe their trade, namely ‘blomdraers’ (flower carriers),²⁴ can be derived from the fact that these first flower sellers carried the flowers into town and sold them from their baskets: hence ‘blomdraers’.

As Lighton also recorded, Thorne eventually became mayor of Cape Town and was knighted. The son of his partner became the Honourable Richard Stuttaford, who was a member of the cabinet in the Union Government.²⁵

Lighton writes that Stuttaford never lost his interest in flowers. As a young reporter Lighton covered the opening of the 1930 spring show in the City Hall, which was opened by Stuttaford. At this occasion, Stuttaford related the story of the beginning of the flower-selling custom, *which is the delight of townsfolk and of every visitor to our shores*. Lighton writes about this event taking place in 1930:

*As a young reporter representing the newspaper which in 1886 had pleaded for spring flowers in the city, I jotted down Mr. Stuttaford's speech, and rushing back to the Cape Argus and got 17 lines of flower history in the City Late edition.*²⁶

According to his “Chronology” at the back of his book, which saw a reprint, this time with colour photographs, in 1973, Lighton states categorically that the first

²² Interview: Mrs Julia Gomez, Flower seller, Retreat, 2009-09-25.

²³ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 8.

²⁴ Interviews: Mrs Gairo Lackay; Mrs Glenda Bowman; Mrs Millie (Christine) Solomon, Flower sellers, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, Cape Town, 2008-01-11; Mrs Mariam (Nappie) Johnson, Flower seller, Lansdowne, 2008-06-03.

²⁵ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 8.

²⁶ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 8.

flower-sellers operated in 1890 in Adderley Street. Interestingly, also according to the “Chronology”, Darling’s famous Hildagonda Duckitt posted nemesia seeds to Suttons, England that same year.²⁷ The Lighton source has provided the most credible dates for the origins of the flower market. Typical Cape Town tourist websites only refer to the origins in a generalised way, e.g., the following:

*Freshly cut flowers – including fynbos species such as king and pincushion proteas, depending on the season – are available from the friendly flower sellers in Adderley Street, where this trade has operated for the past 100 years.*²⁸

Another reference reads:

*Between Strand Street and Darling Street, lies the famous Flower Market. Freshly cut flowers have been sold here on weekdays for more than a hundred years.*²⁹

A website that gives an actual date is that of another tourist website:

*Continuing up Adderley Street we come to Trafalgar Place where you will find the flower sellers of Cape Town. They have used this spot since the 1860s to sell flowers. Have a chat to them, you will find them most entertaining to speak to.*³⁰

It is clear that these websites are not credible sources, and the data therefore cannot be used as reliable for the purposes of this research. No other source could verify the above website’s date of the 1860s.

Flowers found and flowers lost

The Adderley Street flower sellers contributed to the “rediscovery” of the beautiful marsh rose (*Orothamnus zeyheri*) in 1913. It was accepted that the variety was extinct when generations of botanists failed to find a marsh rose after the last was found more than a century ago, at the beginning of the 1800s, writes Lighton.

²⁷ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 198.

²⁸ http://www.capetown.travel/attractions/entry/Adderley_Street_Flower_Sellers/, 2009-07-24.

²⁹ http://www.southafrica-travel.net/westcape/capetown_adderley.htm, 2009-07-24.

³⁰ <http://www.turtlesa.com/Adderleystreet.html>, 2009-07-24.

*Then in 1913 E.J. Steer, whose camera studies of Cape flowers remain a joy to this day, caught sight of a strangely beautiful and unusual flower on the stand of an Adderley Street flower-seller. He bought two flowering branches to photograph for his collection. It was soon established that these were marsh roses, but it was not clear just where they were picked.*³¹

Lighton writes that the interest of W.H. Paterson, *who did so much to put Hermanus on the map at the early flower shows, and curator of the area which was later known as the Fernkloof Nature Reserve*, was roused, and that he then rediscovered a stand of marsh roses – 7 feet high – on a marshy plateau high above Hermanus. Lighton writes the *sequel was that twenty magnificent branches were exhibited at the wild-flower show in the Cape Town City Hall.*³²

However, everything was not always rosy with the flower-sellers and the law. As Lighton writes, wild-flower protection was still in its infancy.³³ Tales from 1839, by English diplomat Charles Bunbury, tells of *Erica coccinea* growing *to the height of a man on the Cape Flats*.³⁴ Just less than one century later, the Cape's flower sellers were accused of contributing to the extermination of erica varieties. Lighton himself writes:

*There is ample evidence that heaths in abundance once grew right up to and on Cape Town's very doorstep. Even within living memory hundreds of acres of pink heath skirted the old Paarl road, and presented an unforgettable sight from mail trains.*³⁵

According to Lighton, when the Cape Horticultural Society held its spring show on 31 October 1895, two collections of heaths made a memorable sight: *[o]ne showed 190 varieties, the other no fewer than 270.*³⁶

Yet, the flower-sellers were regarded as some of the serious violators of the Cape's flower treasure trove.

Lorries laden with stacks of heath came down Sir Lowry's Pass from the Caledon, Elgin and Hermanus districts. Saturdays and Wednesdays were the

³¹ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 90.

³² C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 90.

³³ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 181.

³⁴ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 7.

³⁵ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 8.

³⁶ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 178.

*chief flower-market days when baths and buckets bulging with the loveliest sprays of bell and tubular heath, lined the Adderley Street pavement outside the General Post Office, and you took your choice from fairy-like sheaves – at threepence a bunch.*³⁷

Lighton writes:

*... those heaths have vanished with Cape Town's trams, hansom cabs and the old G.P.O. building itself whose drab sandstone walls seemed to make the beauty of the flowers all the more majestic by contrast.*³⁸

According to Lighton a certain Inspector Farquharson, a *big-hearted man*, had the job to lay charges against the erring flower-sellers. The fines were usually five shilings, which *were paid with a philosophic benevolence and the trade in heath went on.*³⁹

A well-known personality in Cape flower circles who has also written on the Cape flowers, Dorothea Fairbridge, wrote *[t]he Cape heaths are dwindling before the depredations of the flower sellers.*⁴⁰

Although the assortment of flowers on sale today represent typical modern cut flower varieties, the market was founded on the wealth of the Cape's wild flowers, as could be picked in both the Peninsula and the Boland, and as can be seen on some of the first photographs of the variety of flowers on sale (**Figures 2, 3 & 4**).

There were also continuous run-ins between the flower sellers and the Cape's traffic department, when pedestrians complained that they were obstructing the pavement, as many documents in the Cape Archival repository bear testimony to this.⁴¹ The *unsatisfactory affairs* concerning drainage in the area was also a problem. In 1933 a commission resolved to *again refer to the question of a comprehensive scheme for the better control of flower sellers in Adderley Street and Trafalgar Place to the Streets & Drainage Committee and to ask that the question of providing adequate stalls be favourably considered at the next meeting.*⁴² (These obstacles in the way of the flower sellers proved to be a continuous battle, as, according to Williams, they still face various, albeit different challenges, both from the local government and other sources.)⁴³

³⁷ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 182.

³⁸ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 182.

³⁹ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 182.

⁴⁰ C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 183.

⁴¹ Such as Section 194(36) Ordinance no 10 of 1912, ref G.18/101.

⁴² Report dated 1933-02-14; 3/CT 4/2/1/1/247 136/33.

⁴³ Interview [per telephone]: Mr Irefaam (Faan) Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24.



Figure 2: An indication of how many flower sellers were once hawking their trade in Adderley Street.

(Photograph: Western Cape Archive Repository,
Archives General Collection no 6408, s.d.)

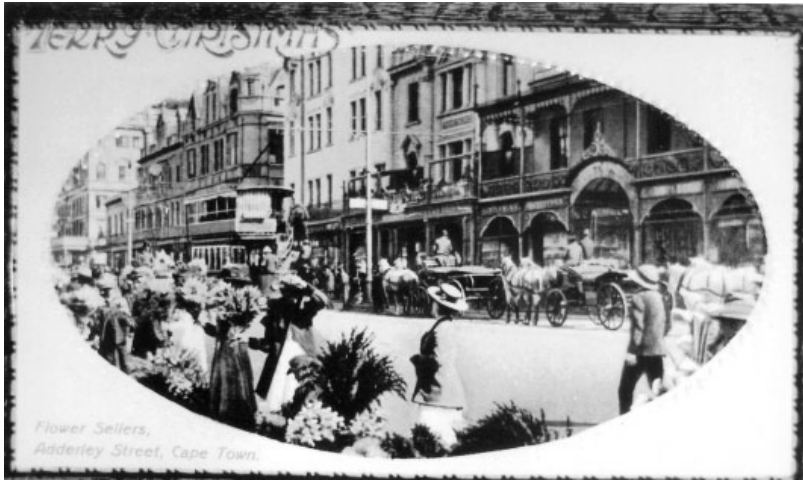


Figure 3: An example of a Christmas card showing the Adderley Street Flower sellers.

(Photograph: Western Cape Archive Repository Archives
General Collection no 11831, s.d.)



Figure 4: *Just smell how sweet my flowers smell!*

A scene in Adderley Street during springtime, with arum lilies in the foreground, and bunches of heath in the background

(Photograph: Western Cape Archive Repository, Elliot Collection no 5405, s.d.)

Role-players

Yet, for all the “trouble” that the flower sellers caused among conservationists and town planners, they also had those who looked after their interests. Besides the indirect “founders” of this trade that still sustain families 120 years later,⁴⁴ namely businessmen Thorne and Stuttaford, other philanthropists also defended the flower-sellers and their plight.

The South African National Women’s League took it upon themselves several times to lobby on behalf of the flower-sellers. Especially Lady Adelheid de Villiers⁴⁵ wrote several letters on behalf of the League to ensure better circumstances for the flower sellers, who very often bore the brunt of traffic offences such as causing congestion on the pavements, as are recorded in numerous documents over many decades in the National Archives of the Western Cape.⁴⁶

Besides the owners of Stuttafords, a Cape Town bishop had also played an important role in the history of the flower sellers. He was bishop Thomas Lightfoot, who ensured that the area on which the flower sellers traded, was kept in trust for their sole use. A monument was erected on Trafalgar Place in his honour. According to Williams, the municipality is obliged not only to maintain the area, but also to upgrade it, however, this, also according to Williams, does not mean that there is the goodwill to do so.⁴⁷

Flower dynasties, and the Strawberry Lane legacy

Some of the existing flower selling families were involved right from the first activities. Family trees of the flower sellers would show how intermarriages kept the trade within certain families, with following generations literally growing up among the flowers, taking in flower talk and flower trade, as it were, with mother’s milk.

One such example is Julaiga Gomez (77) (**Figure 5**). She herself is a third generation flower seller, and as matriarch of 11 children, 51 grandchildren and 94

⁴⁴ According to Lighton’s timeline: C. Lighton, *Cape Floral Kingdom* (1960), p. 198.

⁴⁵ Up to the publication of this article no more information could be found on this persona, despite the aid of two librarians who helped in the search. The author hopes to have more information on her in a subsequent article.

⁴⁶ Such as 3/CT 4/2/1/1/247 136/33, recording problems in 1933; G/18/101, recording “undue congestion” and what should be done in “cases of actual obstruction”, in 1949; 3/CT 4/2/1/1/621 13/1/8, with conditions for licensing, in 1953.

⁴⁷ Interview [per telephone]: Mr Irefaam (Faan) Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24. [In a following article more information on the flower sellers’ struggle to have their market maintained will be discussed.]

greatgrandchildren⁴⁸ this flower dynasty will be the subject of a next exploratory article in this research project.

Another example is that of Gairo Lackay, who was born in 1932.⁴⁹ She started to work for “Aunt Ellie Williams” as a twelve year old girl, roundabout 1944. Her daughter-in-law, Ilaam Williams, is Aunt Ellie’s granddaughter, and married to Gairo’s son – and Ilaam is now the chief flower seller, keeping history alive in Trafalgar Place. **Figure 1** shows this “heart” of Cape Town in its current state, with the flower sellers’ stalls rotating on a monthly basis, giving every family the opportunity to have a stall on the pavement in Adderley Street.



Figure 5: Four generations of a Cape flower dynasty: matriarch Julaiga Gomez (second from right), she herself a third generation flower seller, with her youngest daughter, Ashra Adams (far right), and from left, her oldest grandson, Faan (Irefaam) Williams, now chairperson of the Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, with his oldest daughter, Armina.

The photograph was taken at Gomez’s home in Retreat, Cape Town.

(Photograph: L. Rabe, 2009)

⁴⁸ Interview: Mrs Julaiga Gomez, Retreat, Cape Town, 2009-09-25.

⁴⁹ Interview: Mrs Gairo Lackay, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, Cape Town, 2008-01-11.

Aunt Ellie Williams' son, Amigo Williams, was the first chair of the Trafalgar Place Flower Association, established in 1992 to look after the interests of the flower sellers. Her grandson, Faan Williams (Julaiga Gomez is his maternal grandmother), is currently the chair of the association.⁵⁰ According to Williams, his great grandmother was a flower seller until her death, as was his paternal grandmother.

Another example is Mariam (Nappie) Johnson, born Fredericks, in 1945, now 65 years of age (**Figure 6**). Her mother was Janap (Nappie) Fredericks, born Gallie, in 1917. Her grandmother was Fatima Gallie, born Cloete, who died in 1978. Johnson thinks she might have been born in 1899, but is not sure.⁵¹



Figure 6: Mariam (Nappie) Johnson with her sister Latiefa Such, born Gallie, working at Johnson's home in Lansdowne, Cape Town.

They are third generation flower sellers.

(Photograph: L. Rabe, 2009)

⁵⁰ Interview [via telephone]: Mr Faan Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24.

⁵¹ Interview: Mrs Mariam (Nappie) Johnson, Lansdowne, 2008-06-03.

The Cloetes were from Ladies' Mile, Constantia, and had their own property there, where they grew both vegetables and flowers. Johnson also inherited her mother's nickname, Nappie, because she continued with the hawking.⁵²

She worked with flowers since she was very small. Her family also hawked flowers in Claremont, where at the time when she was small, about ten to twelve families were selling flowers.

Today Johnson's two daughters, Zainab, born in 1968, and Fatima, born in 1973, work for her. One granddaughter, Leila, born in 1996, "peuter" (fiddle) with flowers, and might one day show an interest in flowers, says Johnson.

The pavement selling in Claremont's Main Street has made way for her "stall" now to be on the first parking level of Cavendish Square, an upmarket shopping mall. **Figure 6** shows Johnson with her sister Latiefa Such, born Gallie, working at Johnson's home in Lansdowne.

Other flower sellers at Trafalgar Place, in alphabetical order, are Julaiga Africa, Glenda Bowman, Murky Cornelius, Gairo Dorman, Delia Gamodien, Edmund Menyacho and the sisters Joan and Millie (Christine) Solomons.⁵³ While licences were granted to 55 flower sellers in the 1950s, there were only 16 left in 2008.⁵⁴ It still needs to be established from which year the flower sellers had to obtain a licence in order to hawk their flowers in public.

Besides Trafalgar Place, other traditional spots for flower sellers were the Grand Parade, Claremont, Rondebosch, and Sea Point.

The history of the Strawberry Lane flower sellers and growers should also be mentioned. In his book *Buy My Flowers! The story of Strawberry Lane, Constantia*, Prof Richard van der Ross tells the story of his ancestors and the proud community who were not only flower sellers, but, indeed, flower growers themselves.⁵⁵

Due to the Group Areas Act these pioneering families were removed from the aptly named Strawberry Lane area running along the Spaansche Mat River in Constantia and the once close community was settled elsewhere, in different new "group areas". As it is not the topic of this article, resettlement under the Group Areas Act will not be dealt with.

⁵² Interview: Mrs Mariam (Nappie) Johnson, Lansdowne, 2008-06-03.

⁵³ Interviews: Mrs Gairo Lackay; Mrs Glenda Bowman; Mrs Millie (Christine) Solomon, Flower sellers, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, Cape Town, 2008-01-11.

⁵⁴ Interview: Mrs Millie (Christine) Solomons, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, 2008-01-11.

⁵⁵ R.E. van der Ross, *Buy my flowers! The story of Strawberry Lane, Constantia* (Ampersand Press in association with the University of the Western Cape, 2007).

Two of these families are those of Aunt Mary Petersen⁵⁶ and Moos Jaftha,⁵⁷ the latter still farming on leased land today.

Petersen was born in 1924, and is a living encyclopaedia on the history of the Cape flower families, specifically the Strawberry Lane community. As a small girl, hawking flowers in Sea Point, she remembers *Jews in Sea Point* saying ‘a pretty girl like you must’nt sell flowers’, while she just thought to herself: ‘ag man’, just buy my flowers.⁵⁸

She remembers that the Spaansche Mat River in Constantia, along which banks the families were living, was actually *a ditch with 8 springs from which water bubbled*.⁵⁹ Each year the families cleaned another fountain, and carried water from the spring in tins to irrigate their vegetable and flower lands on the banks of the river.

Flower assortment

Just like other fashions, flowers are also fashionable. Whereas the flower sellers started their trade thanks to the abundance of the Cape’s floral kingdom (picked in the Peninsula and the Boland), this could not be sustainable, and their flower assortment changed to various garden flowers, and today, professionally grown cut flowers.

Petersen remembers her family planted *violets, calendulas, linaria* (‘weeskindertjies’), *pennystamps, marigolds, agapanthus, michaelmasdaisies, chrysanthemums, the ‘old’ freesia, which had a heavenly smell, hot poms, snapdragons, statice and ‘port natou’*⁶⁰ (something similar to a gladiolus). Other flowers which the flower sellers in Adderley Street could add to the above list, are alium, poppies, lupin, cock’s comb, zinnias, shasta daisies, molucella, daffodils, narcissus and dahlia.

Today the flower sellers’ assortment reflects current flower fashions, such as sunflowers, roses, gladioli, irises and the modern freesia. Some of the stalls still have wild flowers on sale, such as that of Edmund Menyacho, whose parents and grandparents also were flower sellers, initially on the Grand Parade, after they moved to the Post Office, and then, since the 1960s, to Trafalgar Place.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Interview: Mrs Mary Petersen, Retiree, Grassy Park, 2008-11-03.

⁵⁷ Interview: Mr Moos Jaftha, Flower grower, Grassy Park, 2008-11-03.

⁵⁸ Interview: Mrs Mary Petersen, Retiree, Grassy Park, 2008-11-03.

⁵⁹ Interview: Mrs Mary Petersen, Retiree, Grassy Park, 2008-11-03.

⁶⁰ Interview: Mrs Mary Petersen, Retiree, Grassy Park, 2008-11-03.

⁶¹ Interview: Mr Eduard Menyacho, Flower seller, Trafalgar Place, 2008-01-11.

From flower seller to flower grower

It is poetic justice that, today, a descendant of a flower seller is not only a flower grower, but has indeed been named as “emerging farmer” in the Western Cape. She is Soraya Naidoo, and her family has been part of the Cape’s flower sellers’ history for generations. Naidoo’s specialised farming activities include, among others, the cultivation of indigenous flowers.⁶²

Naidoo acquired land in the George district, and farms and distributes her produce from the Southern Cape.⁶³ Her whole family is involved in the flower business, and she will also be one of the next foci in this research project.

Current management

Today the flower sellers are allowed to trade according to the hawking regulations of the Cape Town City Council. They pay a fee for water, but no rental, and trade under the terms and conditions of the City Council on Trafalgar Place.⁶⁴

The Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, run by the great grandson of the first ‘blomdraers’ on the sides of both his paternal and maternal families, is a self-regulating body which meets with the municipality on regular occasions.⁶⁵ According to Faan (Irefaam) Williams, there are 21 members who meet on a regular basis. Besides the fact that the area, according to Williams, was put in a trust thanks to the efforts of bishop Lightfoot,⁶⁶ the municipality also has the obligation to maintain the area and to upgrade it on a regular basis – as was the case in July/August 2009, during the most recent upgrading.

Unfortunately, the numbers of the flower sellers are shrinking fast. In 1949 new stalls were built for 60 flower sellers, and in 1953 licences were issued to 50 different sellers. According to different sources, the number of flower sellers at Trafalgar Place today varies between “nine double stalls”, “16” and “21 members belonging to the association”.⁶⁷

⁶² Interview: Mr Anton Hörstmann, Flower grower, Philippi, 2008-01-11.

⁶³ Interview: Mr Anton Hörstmann, Flower grower, Philippi, 2008-01-11.

⁶⁴ Interview [via telephone]: Mr Faan Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24.

⁶⁵ Interview [via telephone]: Mr Faan Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24.

⁶⁶ This statement could not yet be verified from independent sources. A lawyer who acted on behalf of the Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association could also not verify the existence of such an undertaking by the Cape Town City Council.

⁶⁷ Interviews: Mrs Gairo Lackay; Mrs Glenda Bowman; Mrs Millie (Christine) Solomon, Flower sellers, Trafalgar Place, Adderley Street, Cape Town, 2008-01-11.

These remaining flower sellers have a system of rotating stalls monthly, enabling all of them to trade on the pavement of Adderley Street. Whereas they previously resorted under the municipality's traffic department, they now fall under the City Council's "area co-ordinator" in charge of "Business Area Management".⁶⁸

Due to changing buying habits of Capetonians, traffic congestion resulting in potential buyers who cannot park nearby, a change in lifestyle and consumer habits, as well as flowers now available in every supermarket and fuel station, the flower sellers have an uphill battle to survive.

Conclusion

In 2010 it will be "officially" 120 years since the very first flower seller traded her colourful basket of flowers in Adderley Street. 2010 will also be a historical year for South Africa as host of the FIFA Soccer World Cup.

The question remains: will Adderley Street's flower sellers, a world famous touristic icon of the Mother City, have something to celebrate?

This article calls on the municipality and the flower sellers themselves to ensure that a sustainable strategy is put in place. The municipality has to support the flower sellers' needs in order to sustain the tradition and ensure that the market is viable. On their part, the flower sellers will have to co-operate as one body in order to ensure their survival.

A new marketing strategy needs to be formulated, one which will ensure short, medium and long-term loyal customers and supporters of the flower sellers. In terms of adding touristic attraction to Trafalgar Place, a weather proof gallery with historical photographs, telling the story of the flower sellers in text and visuals, will ensure that both locals and tourists will make this a "must see" stop in Cape Town.

Such plans will not only ensure the legacy of the Cape's first "blomdraer" 120 years ago, but will also ensure the livelihood of her successors, as well as preserving a tradition that is not only a world famous beacon for tourists, but a necessity for Capetonians, something which is as "eg Kaaps" (distinctly Cape) as, well, the cloud enveloping our mountain, the beautiful beaches, the smell of bobotie and koesisters – in one phrase: Cape Town's uniquely fragrant, floral heart.

⁶⁸ Interview [via telephone]: Mr Faan Williams, Chairperson, Trafalgar Place Flower Sellers Association, 2009-07-24.